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Museum lifelong learning of the aging people

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Abstract

The aging of population is a common phenomenon in most societies. The aged people live longer and healthier; therefore, they are more willing to participate in both the educational and leisure activities. The conception of “lifelong learning” has increasingly attached great importance to both the formal and non-formal educational institutions. Museum as an important institute of the integrated lifelong learning system should take up the opportunity to develop its elderly audiences by understanding their needs and to propose the exhibitions and activities, to provide them with a satisfied environment to achieve the goals of museum lifelong learning for the elderly.

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1. The aging society

Along with the rising of living standard and progress in medical technology, the life expectancy lengthens; in addition, the declining of birth rate also causes the ratio of aged population accelerates relatively. Although the definition of the “elderly” is difficult to reach a unified agreement; however, at present, many countries take the retirement age of 65 years old as the standard. According to the definition by the World Health Organization, an area with the people aged 65 and above accounting for more than 7% of total population is the “aging society”, if the percentage is over 14%, then it is the “aged society”. In Turkey, the elderly people correspond to 7.1% of the total population while it is 10.38% in Taiwan and approximately 22.1% in Japan (2008). Now, there are more than 50 countries in the world are qualified as the country of an ageing society. Though the industrialized nations of Europe, North America, Japan, and Australia have higher percentages of older people than most developing countries do, however, 62% of all people aged 65 and over now live in the developing countries of Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Oceania. Furthermore, the world’s growth rate for the 80-and-over population was 4.3%, while that of the world’s older (65 and over) population was 2.1%. Undoubtedly, the “ageing society” has become a global issue in this day and age (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

This remarkable global demographic transformation of population structure have profound effects on all stratifications and aspects of the individuals, communities, national and international operations and developments, as a result, many countries actively establishing a variety of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), non-profit

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organizations (NPOs) to improve the financial provision, the healthcare and the social participation of the elderly, as well as to confront with the political, economic, social, cultural and educational challenges of the ageing society. As early as in 1982, The United Nation had summoned The First World Assembly on Ageing in Vienna and passed the *International Plan of Action on Ageing*, which made a range of recommendations on employment and income security, health, housing, education and social welfare of the elderly. In 1991, the *United Nations Principles for Older Persons* addressed the independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity of older persons as the five main issues. Then, in 1992, in the *Proclamation on Ageing*, and in the report of the Second World Assembly on Ageing- *The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing* (2002) they all urged the collaboration among government institutions, non-governmental organizations and private enterprises, and the support from family members to encourage the older people to develop their social, cultural and emotional capabilities.

In an overview of the above reports and guiding principles enacted by the United Nations conferences, we found that the government has drawn upon related policies and plans to take care of not only the physical but also the psychological conditions of the older people to adapt to the rapid social changes, to assist them with independency, to affirm their self-value, to pursue their self-growth, and to achieve their self-realization. Nevertheless, all these goals must be accomplished through both incidentally and well-planned processes and practices of “learning again”. The concept of “never too late to learn”, “live and learn” has been prevailed at all times and in all countries. Though the notions, meanings, features, guiding principle and developments of lifelong study (lifelong learning) are all with different manifestations, processes and strategies in various countries according to their population composition, political and economic priorities, cultural values and social development; however, the proposition of lifelong study has been part of the academic theory in Europe, in America and in many countries, and it has gradually become the enactment and revolution of educational and learning system, the important basis of different policy initiatives and structures of social advancement and reformation for the educators and policymakers.

2. Lifelong learning

The idea of lifelong education was first fully stated by the British scholar, Basil Yeaxlee, in his *Lifelong Education* (1929) which explained that the lifelong education was rooted in the human nature and human needs. He also pointed out that lifelong education can take place in many places (homes, clubs, churches, cinemas, theatres, concert rooms, trade unions, political societies), applying multiple forms and media (books, newspapers, music, wireless sets), and with groups of people (Yeaxlee 1929: 155). Additionally, in modern days, the route also included the technological devices, such as television, radio, email, text message and the internet. Moreover, the American pioneer in adult education, Eduard C. Lindeman pointed out the four assumptions of adult education in the first chapter of his *The Meaning of Adult Education* published in 1926 that education is life; non-vocational principles; situations not subjects; and people's experience. In other words, adult education is not confined to adults, but the whole life is a learning process and it will continue throughout an individual's lifetime; its main purpose is to add meaning or even enjoyment to the whole of life instead of cultivating vocational skills or knowledge, or to gain grades and qualifications; its content is built on the learner's interests and needs rather than on set courses or established curriculum; therefore, it's adjustable and the learner's life experience is regarded as the most valuable resource for learning.

In the 1940s, United Kingdom Education Act reflected the thinking of lifelong education. France also mapped out the concept of “lifelong education (education permanente)” in the legislature file for the first time in the 1950s. In 1965, the famous French adult educator, Paul Lengrand advocated the concept of “lifelong learning” in *The Third International Committee for the Advancement of Adult Education (UNESCO)*. For the first time, “lifelong learning” appeared formally in an international conference and became the basic concept of the educational development in the United Nations. 1970 was designated by The United Nations and UNESCO as the *International Education Year*. 1972, the *Faure Report* (by Edgar Faure) proposed lifelong education as the master concept for educational policies. 1973, the Organization of Economic Co-operation Development published *Recurrent Education- The Strategy of Lifelong Learning* emphasized the importance of lifelong learning concept in the adult education. In the 1970s and 1980s, there were lots of literatures engaging in the discussions on lifelong education (or adult, permanent, recurrent, continuing, non-formal or informal education), and the term “lifelong education” has been substituted by “lifelong learning” in much of the literature and policy discussions.

The US Congress passed the *Mondale Act of 1976* addressed various lifelong learning needs of adults. Japan enforced the *Lifelong Learning Promotion Law* in 1990. Lifelong learning continued to be one of the main issues in the White Paper (1996) and in the *Delors Report* (chaired by Jacques Delors) published by EU and UNESCO. In addition, the *Delors Report* and Peter Jarvis' article of 1996 both claimed that the "lifelong learning" will be one of the vital keys to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. At the start of the twenty-first century, lifelong learning is still regarded as an essential educational and social issue in most countries. The European Commission published a *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* and adopted a Communication on *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* consecutively in 2000 and 2001 which consisting of six key messages, including addressing new basic skills, investing time and money in learning, innovation in teaching and learning, valuing learning and bringing together learners and learning opportunity. The *European Report on Quality Indicators of Lifelong Learning* issued by The European Commission in 2002 signified that the assurance of the quality of lifelong learning is very important. It comprised fifteen indicators in four areas: the skills, competencies, and attitudes of individual; the access and participation; the resources for lifelong learning; the strategies and system development; and in which it proposed the undertaking in ICT (information and communications technology) in learning. The focal subject of the EU in both 2006 and 2007 is "It is never too late to learn" which urged member states to create a lifelong learning culture. In the announcement after the Lisbon Spring Summit in 2001, the EU Council and Commission proposed a report of "*Education & Training 2010*" in 2004 and published in 2008 which underlined the improvements of quality and effectiveness in education and training, including developing lifelong learning strategies.

Review the international conferences and their outputs of the elderly society and lifelong learning affairs, we found that the focal points and priorities had been shifted from the functional features to more psychological aspects, for example, from the concerns of their health, economic, and skill then to their attitude and emotions, participation in social and cultural activities, and also the cooperation of other people and institutions to confront with the ageing society together. For the elderly, it is more important to keep them remaining and act vigorously in the society even after retirement. Through the continuous participation in the learning activities, the elderly can cultivate new interests and develop their additional abilities; increase the amenities and quality of their life; enlarge their life scope; achieve self-realization; promote the status of the elderly in the family and society, and remain influential in the community. In view of the rapid increase in the number of elderly population and its direct impact on the way society is organized; actually, there is almost no society is spared from the phenomenon of ageing population. We are facing not only the reshape of social structure, the redistribution of resources, but the complex relationships of multi generations with diverse mentalities, behaviors and values. Every member of the society must be adept in learning how to live together; therefore, the learning span is through the whole of life, there is no ending. Government must regard the promotion of lifelong learning for the elderly as its responsibility; format education-related laws and regulations; organize or mandate the related cultural and educational institutions to provide learning opportunities to the elderly; devote much attention to the elderly education and achieve the ideal of the elderly "lifelong learning".

3. Museum education

Museum as an important cultural and social education institute makes use of its collections, exhibitions and activities to provide a more flexible, diverse, interactive non-formal learning. According to the ICOM's definition:

"A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment."

(ICOM Statutes, adopted by the 22nd General Assembly, Vienna, Austria, 24 August 2007)

Though museum defined itself as a social institution that serves all section of the population; yet, most of the museum exhibition programs and educational activities are focused on the provision for the school age children, the young people, the general public, and the specialized and professional groups; with very little attention to the elderly population. From the Gerontology study, lifelong education research and museum art education theories we know that the elderly people of today are more positive toward the later life and new environments, and have stronger learning enthusiasm; nevertheless, it is not suitable for the older people to be engaged in the complicated or severe learning activities; on the other hand, the elderly people prefer to learn in a more informal or non-formal pattern of learning which are generally unorganized, unsystematic and even unintentional; such as to learn in a variety of places beyond the classroom (Bentley, 1998) and at different times, at work or at play; through the non-curriculum

forms of interactive and communal discussions, presentations, information and guidance (McGivney, 1999); as well as, to learn with different people, with families, friends, colleagues, and people of similar interests and needs; through participation in a group or association to share each other's life experience and to develop a more lively public life (Jeff and Smith, 2005).

In view of the transformation of population structure, museum should develop its elderly audiences by the thorough exploration and comprehension of biological, psychological and social developments and changes of the aging population; and moreover, museum should attempt to recognize the demand of artistic education of the elderly people and the factors that affect their study; to identify the access barriers that keep the aged people away from entering the museum; at the same time, museum should endeavor to motivate the elderly audiences to visit the museum exhibitions and to participate in the museum artistic activities and educational programs.

In order to have a basic understanding of what related activities or special services that museums have provided for the elderly people, I have sent e-mails to more than thirty domestic (Taiwan) and international (Belgium, China, France, Holland, Japan, USA and UK) public and private museums as the preliminary survey. Most museums offer discount or free of entrance for over 65s or 70s and provide facilities such as wheelchair ramp, elevators, wheelchair for the disabled, enlarged front brochures and large print information for individuals with visual impairments, the medical kit, study stool or reading glasses for any visitors who need them. While asking about other respects, such as whether the theme, the content, the planning, the presentation and the interpretation of the exhibitions and the educational activities are concerned with the elderly audiences, most of the museums explain that their provision of services are for all people as the answer, only a very small number of museums have arranged courses and tours for the groups from senior centers, or held the annual "Grandparents Day" (MOMA), when the museum is closed to the public. Seniors are welcome to attend with or without grandchildren. Individuals may participate in art making workshops, gallery tours, or listen to music. Some museums do not hold any events or programs that are specially aimed at over 65s, however, all their paid events: lectures, films, study days etc, have a senior discount. Some museum replied that they would consider developing the related facilities and services for the aged audiences in the future; however, there are some museums reacted in a very unfriendly manner as if they were offended by the questions.

On the other hand, according to the in-depth interviews with forty-eight elderly people who are the members of the senior centers or senior colleges in 12 different districts of Taipei city (in Taiwan) that the results are corresponding to Marilyn Hood's and Judy Rand's studies on adults' selecting in spending their leisure time, which include: "being with people, or social interaction; doing something worthwhile; feeling comfortable and at ease in one's surroundings; having a challenge of new experiences; having an opportunity to learn; participating actively" (Hood, 2004); as well as "comfort- meet my basic need; orientation- make it easy for me to find my way around; welcome/belonging- make me feel welcome; enjoyment- I want to have fun; socializing- I came to spend time with my family and friends; respect- accept me for who I am and what I know; communication- help me understand, and let me talk, too; learning- I want to learn something new; choice and control- let me choose, give me some control; challenge and confidence- give me a challenge I know I can handle; revitalization- help me leave refreshed, restored" (Rand, 1994). Most of the interviewees declare the main reasons that they go to museums are because they like art, visiting museums is a good leisure activity, increasing the delight of life, cultivating artistic taste and ability, killing time, making friends, going with friends or families, contacting with the outside world, craving for learning; however, the reasons of their choose not to visit museums include lacking of time, interests or information; schedule conflict (prefer other leisure activities: karaoke, playing chess, qigong, mountain climbing, gardening, fishing, going to spas or hot spring, volunteering for welfares, participating in religious activities), health problem, no companions, inconvenient transportation, the exhibition has little relation with them, hard to understand the meaning of the exhibits (too old to learn, difficulties in using the technological devices, not enough description of the display), unpleasant experiences (too many visitors crowded into the space and hard to get a closer look at the items on display nor can they hear the oral touring and they were even pushed to move fast by the crowds), too few seats and no place for rest, the font, size and colour of the signs are indistinct, and only one interviewee complains about the attitude of the museum staff, and another complains the food of museum cafeteria.

Museum should take the results of the interviews into consideration to improve the facilities and installations and to develop exhibitions and programs especially for the elderly audiences. For the facilities, besides the barrier-free environment, museum should install more seats in the exhibition area or a lounge with newspapers, magazines, music that the elderly people can get some relaxation. Museum provides different guided services; for the verbal guide, it is better that the conductor speaks a bit slowly and louder, speaking in the dialect that the elderly groups are familiar with if it is possible, making good use of body language, avoiding trivial details or professional

terminology, and finishing the tour within a tolerable period of time for the elderly people. All the texts of signs, information and exhibition panels should be shown in a sufficient light but not dazzlingly bright environment with lucid writing, recognizable and comfortable font, size and color for the elderly. The objects (Falk and Dierking, 2000), new media and technological devices should be easy for the elderly to operate. The content of the exhibitions and activities should be leisure, educational and relating to their life and experiences; for some seniors, museum turns up in their life just recently and they presume it as a prestigious place for the rich or for learning only, not a place for leisure, for entertainment, or for them. Museum should engage the elderly people, senior centers and senior colleges in planning and developing the more self-explorative, self-directing (Landmin, 1997), reminiscent and interactive programs which respond to their own interests, needs, and life style choices; and furthermore, to attract the elderly nonparticipants to come and share their ideas, emotions and experiences, in order to achieve the goal of museum lifelong learning for the elderly.

Finally, this report would like to point out that the ageing issues related to the formulation of museum policy, the implementation of museum management, the target of museum marketing, and the development of ageing (silver-haired) industry are worthy of further studies and discussions to the fulfillment, completeness and advancement of museum lifelong learning for the elderly.

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